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Aspects of Tukano /Tucano/ Culture: Cosmogony

by Marcos Fulop

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/99/ Commissioned by the Dirección of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, we are initiating ethnographic studies among the natives of the Comisaría Especial del Vaupes. We have considered it convenient to begin the anthropological study of the cultures of this region with the Tukano /Tucano/ group.

114 The material that is published below was gathered during
101 our stay in the settlement of Guadalajara, on the Paca River,
124 from June 13 to July 9, 1953. Our informant was Marcos Sierra,
128 and Manuel Sierra, the brother of the preceding, served as inter-
772 preter. Owing to the short time of the investigation and to hav-
772 ing consulted only one informant, we are not able to guarantee
769 the exactitude of the version of the Tukano cosmogony given by Marcos Sierra. This cosmogony is repeated in the manner of a cult to the ancestors during the feasts of Dabukurí and Yuruparí.

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171 The Tukano culture is actually representative of the cultures of the tropical forests of South America. Their regimen of life is sedentary; they practice horticulture, and bitter yuca (1)

1. Manihot utilissima.

constitutes the basis of their alimentation, which is supplemented with products obtained by means of hunting and fishing; they are efficient in the construction and handling of river vessels; they use the hammock for a bed; they possess the art of ceramics and do not know metalurgy.

131 The Tukano Indians are found located on the lower Vaupés /Uaupés/ River, from the falls of Ipanoré to the outlet of the Vaupés into the Río Negro; on the Tiquié and Papurí /Papury/ rivers; and on small streams that empty into these three rivers.

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[P.vii]

Acknowledgments

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with its white residents, they had no reason not to regard it as a friendly place. The *Comisaría* protected their labor rights, supervising terms of contract and entertaining their complaints of unfair treatment. When an Indian completed his term of labor he was "paid off" in the presence of an official in charge of Indian affairs. The Indians regarded the government as fair. The *Comisaría* provided medical aid to those Indians who came to seek it. At the same time it respected native life and interfered with the Indians as little as possible. Although the Cuduiarí is readily accessible from Mitú it was entered only rarely by administrative personnel. When I lived among the *Bahûkiwa* some 15 hours by canoe from Mitú, I had the sense of total isolation from this administrative center. The normal everyday life on the Cuduiarí was completely Indian. In the time of Wallace there had been bad blood between Indians and Colombians, but by the time Koch-Grünberg arrived relations between the Cubeo and the government had already become peaceable.

In Mitú I met Mandú, headman of the *Bahûkiwa* sib of the middle Cuduiarí. He had come to seek medical treatment for his young son, who had injured his knee in a fall. The headman and I became friends and he invited me to visit. When I promptly accepted his invitation I was surprised to find that he had already begun to build a house for me and that the Indians had expected me to settle among them. He had discussed the matter with his people, he told me later, and they had agreed that it would be good to have me live among them. The reasons for wanting me never became too clear, but I came to believe that they thought I would offer them some protection from the pressure of the labor recruiters.

I was informally "adopted" as the younger brother of Mandú. For a while people were amused to address me by an appropriate kinship term. In time this jest lost its freshness and I came to be regarded simply as *pakomá* (kinsman). Nevertheless, I was considered to be a member of Mandú's household even though I had a house of my own alongside the maloca. Mandú sent his older wife, with whom he was no longer living, to serve as my cook. With Mandú's household I had all the privileges of informality. My relations with other households were friendly but more restrained. Since I did not contribute an appropriate share of fish and game to the household, or to the maloca as a whole, I felt obliged to reciprocate food and services with periodic gifts of cloth, tobacco, fishhooks, and ammunition. At one time during a drinking party at which I was not present, a son of Mandú distributed all my trade goods to the guests "in my behalf." However, during the period of many weeks when I no longer had trade goods

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123 my status in the community was as before. I still could count upon food and services.

● [122] I participated to some degree in the male life of the community and came to learn the language and the culture as much by slow enculturation as by questioning. I had no principal informants because no 123 124 one would serve in that capacity. All were willing to talk, to explain matters to me, but only in the accustomed atmosphere of easy and genial chatter. The people I knew best and the household of Mandú, in particular, were paradoxically the poorest systematic informants. They were most impatient and most easily vexed with the informant role. They regarded the open notebook and the persistent line of questioning as counter to our relationship. For prolonged and probing investigations I called upon the head of a *Bahúkiwa* subsib. Even this man was a very patient informant only when he was my guest among the *Bahúkiwa*. On his home grounds we were back on small talk. In Mitú I could talk to Indian women more freely than I could on the Cuduiari, where my relations with them had to be more correct. My house alongside the maloca was an informal social center which children and unattached women felt free to visit without invitation. The children taught me things they thought I ought to know about native customs. This was a privilege they had which adults, with their acute tactfulness about criticizing, intruding, or imposing upon others, could not exercise.

The Indians placed no serious obstacles in the way of my studies. They would not explain or discuss openly a ritual act at the time it was going on because to do so would be to counteract its effects. [831] They did not, however, mind answering questions later and in a more [521] general context. Moreover, they expected me to preserve the proprieties of tact in asking questions about domestic matters. Sex was a difficult subject, as were invidious comparisons. The Cubeo are not eager purveyors of gossip. After trouble had erupted in the open one could ask for and receive a discreet and sober account of some domestic difficulty. At the same time that the Indians imposed upon me their own reserve they were also sensitive to any evident disappointment when my questions went unanswered. Thus, if I persisted I often [831] could get an answer, but I had to follow protocol, since personal relations among adults are rich in decorum and social etiquette. I also had available to me the more informal channels of the play pack of children, which delighted in passing on some household gossip, as well as of old women, whose verbal bawdiness was in marked contrast to the customary verbal restraint of the men on sexual matters.

114 I chose to stay in one community and to benefit from the intimacy

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serve, perhaps of suspicion, as though the meal had established a relationship between me and the "enemy." Because, at their insistence, I lived among the *Bahúkiwa* as an "Independent" in a small hut of my own I shared only in the festive meals. But when I traveled with them and took part in what they were doing I shared in the food of whatever household I happened to be most closely associated with in the current activities.

Men give game and fish to their wives and to their mothers. If there is to be a further distribution to other women the wives and mothers usually make it. When a man gives fish or game to a girl whom he may marry he will have declared his intentions. In ceremonial friendship, food exchange between men and women is a most important token of closeness of relationship. In food preparation the Cubeo follow the common tropical forest pattern: women boil, men bake and broil.

The visitor to a maloca is given a pepper pot (*bya*) in which to dip a bit of manioc cake. This offering of the pepper pot is a token of feeding; it may even be refreshing to a weary traveler but it is not food; it is in lieu of food. The casual visitor is received into the coolness of the house and is offered the visitor's bench near the door. When he is seated, the headman's wife appears with a small pot of boiled capsicum peppers which she sets on the ground before him. She withdraws after inviting him to eat. She then comes back with a tray on which is a manioc cake or a portion of one, sets this before the pepper pot, and withdraws. Then each woman of a household brings forward her own pot of peppers and adds manioc cake to the tray of the headman's wife. When the guest is alone with the pepper pots he leaves the bench, and, crouching, dips small bits of manioc into the pepper pot, taking care to taste of each. He does not eat as though hungry, but solemnly, just tasting. He returns quickly to the bench and the women come forward and remove the pots. That is the extent to which a guest is fed. The offering of *bya* and manioc cake has a precise meaning. It is enough food to betoken hospitality. On the other hand, the peppers are of a class of excitant substances that are suitable for the atmosphere of excitation when guests are entertained. Food formality is most marked among the elders and most relaxed among younger men either not yet married or newly wed. I have seen such young men visiting another sib mock the formalities of the pepper pot with their age mates and even join in a family meal. When they do so they make it clear that they are jesting.

Within the maloca there are two eating arrangements. One, within the household, is informal, and the other, collective or maloca-wide, is formal. In informal eating, husband, wife, and children of both sexes

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cool fresh air, the eternal rush of people, the noise of traffic, all spurred us on to prepare for our next journey to Amazonia. For three weeks we were able to enjoy the luxuries of a modern city. Our bare attic was the store-room and we slept on the floor, while Joan the landlady with true North Country generosity fed us large meals of Yorkshire pudding and shepherd's pie. There were newspapers, films, exhibitions, concerts, parties and pretty girls, but our time was always short. When we returned to our sleeping bags we were faced by huge piles of film, cooking pots, tarpaulins and hammocks, all waiting to be rearranged and repacked for the next journey.

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Each journey was to demand different organization but the one to the Río Piraparaná was to be the longest and hardest of all. We would be out of touch with all traces of civilization for three months. Even at this stage we were unable to predict our route. Neither the maps nor the information available were sufficient for us to make definite plans. Dr Schultes, the Harvard botanist, had originally advised us to go to the Piraparaná, though he had also warned us not to go too far down because of the extensive and dangerous rapids. A Colombian botanist told us to take the opposite route and go up the Piraparaná from its mouth. Our efforts to find the right solution met with many conflicting answers.

The only direct means of reaching this river in a remote part of Colombia some four hundred miles south-east of Bogotá was to fly. We settled on Mitú as our starting point, having decided to descend the river largely because of the advice of the Catholic Mission there. This settlement, close to Brazil on the Río Vaupés, was the Mission's base and the most accessible point to the Piraparaná. During the planning stages in September Brian had flown in on a cargo plane and discussed our plans with the Monseñor and the padres. Even then the Monseñor warned us that if we arrived any later than the end of November we might run into severe difficulties – there would be no water in the beds of the streams. It was now the beginning of December.

We had to find a plane to take not only ourselves but also an aluminium boat, two outboard motors and all our equipment. The regular fortnightly service was out of the question because the passenger plane could not carry our boat, and to charter an aircraft was beyond our means. So we asked the Colombian Air Force whether they could help. Our chances seemed hopeful since some troops had to be collected from another nearby frontier post. However, only a week before we were due to leave we had a severe setback. An unfortunate article about the expedition appeared in the Press, there were many exaggerations – we were even supposed to have a portable laboratory! – and mainly as a result of this the director of one of the scientific institutes withdrew his support, which meant that Nestor probably would not be able

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Noanamá headman with pendant silver ear-plugs.

[see p. 34-A]

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to come with us. We were also afraid that the Catalina flying boat would be withdrawn as well. We had nothing more than letters of recommendation from scientific bodies in Britain and, with no official support behind us, the Colombians had every reason to doubt our validity. They could well feel that this was work they could do just as well themselves. For two days the fate of the expedition seemed in the balance.

Fate was on our side. The Commander of the Air Force agreed to fly the expedition to Mitú on 15 December. The only restriction was that the two hundred gallons of fuel given to us by an oil company could not travel in the same aircraft. We would have to find another way of flying our fuel to Mitú. As we walked out of the Air Ministry and across the road towards the vast Tequendama Hotel we unexpectedly came upon Horacio, strolling dejectedly along the pavement.

'I've just left the bookshop,' he said. 'I had a quarrel with the boss's daughter, and now once more I'm without a job. I think I'll go back to the Llanos, find a canoe and stay down there until the rains arrive. All I need are books, some rice and beans, my hammock and my mosquito net, and I'll be happy.'

'Heavens,' we said. 'Why don't you come with us?'

Horacio's eyes twinkled and later that evening he came to our attic and said he would join us. Educated in Europe, he and his brother had both been to Bedales and later he had graduated from a Swiss university with a degree in chemical engineering. On returning to Colombia he had found a wandering life more agreeable than research or business. Now in his mid-forties he lived and worked in Bogotá as little as possible. With his wide knowledge and complete fluency in five European languages, he had been a great asset to many expeditions which he usually accompanied as a professional photographer under the pseudonym of Robinson. But he preferred to travel alone. Though always helpful, he was nevertheless a strangely remote person. Our meeting turned out to be one of the most fortunate moves of the whole expedition, for besides his vast experience and fund of jungle knowledge Horacio turned out to be a marvellous friend.

The final three days were ones of hectic preparation. The motors had to be checked, the aluminium boat transported to the military airbase; these had been loaned to us on the understanding that we would carry out a reconnaissance geological survey for an oil company. Food supplies piled higher and higher in Joan's attic, for we had to feed not only ourselves but our Indian guides and helpers as well. Colombian money would be of no use to these people. So, on Horacio's advice, yards and yards of coloured cloth were

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ABOVE LEFT: *Noanamá boy, his face painted with* bija. ABOVE RIGHT: Jagua *patterns a boy's body.* BELOW: *Children listening to our tape recorder.*

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122 bought. Pins, needles, reels of thread, mirrors, brightly-coloured combs and extra fish-hooks to supplement those Donald had already brought from England were all found in the market area. After hours of haggling we would wend our way homewards, laden with tins, paraffin lamps, rope, candles and many other items. Up to the very last moment we were packing endless supplies into plastic bags and rubber bags, inside kitbags and into tins which we had painted bright red to cheer us up in the green forest.

Early on the morning of the 15th a truck arrived; we loaded and left for the airbase, only to find the boat would not fit into the Catalina. They had been trying since six in the morning. There was nothing we could do, we had to take the flight or not go at all. So we left, without Nestor and without our boat. We had luckily sent the fuel ahead to Mitú in a cargo plane.

We slowly climbed above Bogotá and thence across the Eastern Cordillera towards the Llanos. As we landed at Villavicencio the oppressive heat seeped into the aircraft. Situated directly underneath the foothills of the Cordillera, it is the port of entrance to the Llanos and the tropical forests bordering the plains to the south. Here ranchers ride the streets, tether their horses and carouse in the beer saloons till dawn; then they return to their *fincas* deep in the plains. From here the rivers run east, to the Orinoco and then to the Atlantic.

We continued on our way southwards over undulating grasslands, then over unbroken forest. Suddenly we entered a storm and, as we bumped up and down, became lost in swirling rain. An hour later we emerged and a ridge appeared on the horizon. Beyond, the wide brown Vaupés with a straggling line of painted wooden houses broke the unending carpet of green. We landed on the white sandy strip of Mitú; once a rubber boom town, now a lonely outpost settlement and mission station, an oasis in the forest.

648 Earlier we had heard we might find it difficult to make friendly contact with the Indians of the Piraparaná. Very few white men had been able to enter the river, either from its source or its mouth, since the beginning of the century, when the most brutal atrocities had been committed by the Casa Arana[1]. This rubber company, financed by British and Peruvian interests, had extracted rubber from north-west Amazonia to export it down the Amazon through Manaos. The camp chiefs established themselves as potentates and were greatly feared. Their labour was entirely drawn from the Indians whom they treated not as human beings but as slaves. Women were raped, men who displeased their masters brutally murdered, those who failed to carry sufficient loads had their hands slashed off with machetes and were left to die. Many spent their lives in chains. So serious were the atrocities that in 1912 Sir Roger Casement brought the matter before the House of Commons. Many Indians retreated into the Amazon's remoter tributaries.

[1] The atrocities were in the Putumayo region – not the Piraparaná – but their influence was felt throughout north-west Amazonia.

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El Diablo

Today the *caucheros* still avoid the Piraparaná. Only a few years previously one had entered and tried to take an Indian's wife. He was shot with poisoned arrows and savagely cut to pieces. Two botanists had travelled some distance up the river from its mouth, but no one had descended its entire course. At Mitú only Padre Elorza was able to give us first-hand information. Young and zealous, he had been the first missionary to enter the Piraparaná, one month before we arrived. He had travelled half-way down the river and then turned up a tributary to Brazil. A wooden canoe could withstand the rough journey, he said; an aluminium one would not only be too wide for the creeks of the headwaters but would get ripped on the boulders. A suitable canoe, with a hollowed tree-trunk base and sides built up with planks, was lying half-filled with water in the mud at the side of the Vaupés; it belonged to the Mission but he thought the Monseñor might lend it to us. He also told us that his Spanish-speaking guide, an Indian from the Brazilian tributary he had ascended, was still in Mitú and he advised us to take him. He knew the river and he spoke the Tukano dialects. So we employed José, a small and somewhat shifty-looking man, together with his more genial brother, Uriel. We would pay them in pesos and feed them; they would take us to the Piraparaná and from there return to their home. From Padre Elorza we also learnt that two Persian anthropologists had reached the first house on the river only the year before. They had arrived earlier in the season than ourselves, stayed two weeks with the Indians and then returned to Mitú. The headwater streams still had had water in them. We were not to be so lucky.

That evening as we drank cold sweet lemon juice with the padres, their lives for a moment seemed blissfully peaceful and remote. They showed us their museum of countless ceremonial death masks, once worn by the Indians of the Vaupés. It seemed a curious paradox that we were entering territory with the help of a mission which was doing everything to displace the culture we had come so far to see. We walked back to the wooden house of the Commissioner where our host Don Alonso, wizened and immaculate, sat listening to the radiogram beneath an old tarnished chandelier – Mitú had known better days. Don Alonso insisted we drank beer and *aguadiente* and met everyone in his town; the negro who could repair the canoe and whose wife cooked delicious mealy *tamales*; the doctor and nurses from the hospital; the mechanic to test the outboard motors; many *caucheros* and finally a young Argentinian dentist who aimed to make his fortune capping people's teeth with gold. His price was high, but he would accept crude rubber, pelts and crocodile skins as payment before he moved on to the next outpost. The evening ended in hilarity as we danced to scratched seventy-eights revolving on a gramophone whose coiled trumpet betrayed its age.

Next morning before dawn, our thick heads were stirred by resounding hymns. It was Sunday and the Mission had their loudspeakers at work to call the town to Mass. We too went inside the crowded church. Later that day

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• 122 the Friar Tuck Monseñor formally lent us *El Diablo*, the leaky canoe which we now had to repair. Horacio became more and more perturbed by the enormous quantity of fuel and equipment we had decided to take with us; we would be bogged down in no time, he said. Much was left behind and through fear of the rapids ahead we decided not to risk the Kudelski, the most valuable tape recorder; this after all was only the second of five journeys. We cabled Nestor to follow us with the aluminium boat as soon as he could, but to travel as light as possible; for the rivers would be even lower by the time he arrived. In anticipation we left him drums of fuel and supplies. Still we had too great a load for *El Diablo* alone and Don Alonso kindly lent us his larger canoe, *El Vencedor* (The Conqueror), with his motorman Candilo and an assistant. Time was short, we had to go now and, as Horacio aptly remarked 'muddle our way through to the Piraparaná'.

This was the most difficult of all our journeys. The past few days had been filled with worries and doubts, while our plans had had to be modified beyond recognition. Yet we had been warned to always be flexible when travelling in Amazonia, a place where 'two and two never make four'.

El Vencedor sank lower and lower into the water as we loaded, first the fifteen-gallon fuel drums, thirteen in all, then our mountain of equipment and food supplies, planned to last us for the next three months. Now we were ready to leave with the two boats lashed together fore and aft with two wooden poles. Suddenly there came a rumour that an Avianca plane would be arriving, and we decided to await the final chance of news from Nestor; perhaps the aluminium canoe was to be sent through after all. While waiting we said good-bye to the padres whose bearded faces barely concealed their obvious doubts about our future. Then we learnt that the plane had been cancelled.

The motor started and the three of us, together with four Indians, left the landing stage with a wave from Don Alonso and the villagers. They had all been more than kind to us, had in fact enabled us to start the journey when at one stage, with no boat, all had seemed lost. Now, as we travelled up the wide, 'black' Río Vaupés, we had every reason to wonder what lay ahead. Our raft-like craft moved slowly but steadily up either bank, never in midstream, for the current was very strong. We took it in turns at the outboard motor but soon realized that Candilo was by far the most capable hand, so we sat and read. Horacio, his broken glasses perched on the end of his aquiline nose, looked the ideal sage, lost in a German book on atomic physics.

The lower reaches of the Vaupés, as it runs into Brazil to join the larger Río Negro, are a series of dangerous rapids. Only recently one of the padres from

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Noanamd woman cutting sugar cane.

[See p. 38-A]

Mitú had met his death with two of his Indians when their canoe overturned. The upper reaches of the river have a gentler gradient, passing through softer sandstones instead of the hard igneous rocks of the lower course. Nonetheless we soon had to negotiate our first rapids. To the uninitiated eye it seemed impossible to pass through, but Candilo, after one false attempt when the motor stalled, took the half-loaded *Vencedor* skilfully through the jutting boulders. Donald followed with our smaller motor powering the loaded *El Diablo*, her bows nosing into the frothing water and the waves breaking over the fuel drums. This was our first rapid; we had no idea that we would have so many more to negotiate before the end of our journey. Brian examined the rocks, chipping off pieces, looking at them through a lens and packing samples away for our geological collection. Then we lashed the canoes together as fast as possible and continued to creep along the banks, eating our lunch of dry biscuits and *farinha* – a thirst-quenching mixture of manioc flour and water, the Indian's habitual meal when travelling.

The tropical sunset is swift, with no extended twilight, and so by five-thirty each day we had to stop travelling and quickly find a break in the forested bank where we could make camp. Our boats tied and the cooking equipment ashore, we set about cutting a clearing. Horacio was a cook *par excellence*. Years of travel had taught him that the most efficient stove was to be made from a tall biscuit tin; you made your fire at the bottom and placed the pressure cooker on the top. We were eating our diet of rice and corned beef within half an hour of landing and, slinging our hammocks, were soon gazing up at the starry sky, listening to the croak of the bullfrogs.

Soon we left behind the wide Vaupés with its deserted forest banks and entered the black enclosed waters of the Río Ti. With the dry season already well advanced and with less water every day, we were forced to unlash our two canoes and continue with one following the other. The stream narrowed, the black waters shallowed and the white sandbanks crept closer on every bend. Near the mouth of the river we had arranged for two more Indians, the brothers Matias and Bernavez, to come to help us. They knew the route through to the Piraparaná and they warned us that, with our heavy loads, we were going to find the journey extremely difficult – unless it rained. Their warning was fully justified, for with the lower river level the fallen tree trunks formed one long barricade to our movement upstream. In the rainy season with the high water, one could float over them, but now every trunk had to be cut. Fortunately the Indians were experts with our axes, their muscular bodies perched precariously on a water-borne log, the axe falling rhythmically against the hard wood, the water splashing up into their faces. These were civilized Indians who could speak Spanish; they had

Working a trapiche, *a press for crushing the juice from sugar cane.*

 [see p. 38-B]

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originally worked wild rubber for one of the great rubber barons and they had earned their clothing in exchange for their labours. Their torn trousers were only a veneer of the civilized world, for here they seemed to come into their own element: they talked to each other in Tukano; they became alert to the forest they knew so well.

We were living in a closed world of limited horizons, on either side the thick forest, ahead the river and above a ribbon of sky. Giant emerald kingfishers with orange heads and long black beaks darted out in front of us. Myriads of white butterflies rose off the sandbanks, settling on our bodies to enjoy the salty sweat. On occasions we saw a delicate wader like a sandpiper bob up and down on the sand near the water's edge. The water had now changed colour, no longer black but a deep wine red, as it flowed over the pale sandy bed. We supposed this colour was due to the high iron content in the rock.

Our first major halt was made at Pedro's house. He had established himself as a tradesman between the Indians on the upper Piraparaná and the civilized rubber gatherers of Mitú. He bought *farinha* from the Tukano in exchange for fish-hooks, salt and cloth. His magnificent thatched house was a foretaste of what we were to see. But the occupants with their dishevelled clothes, the sheets of crude rubber hanging from the beams and the iron cooking pots, seemed a strange paradox.

We unloaded all our equipment, sending Candilo and his assistant back to Mitú with *Vencedor* and the larger outboard motor. With him went one of our valuable cameras whose shutter had jammed during the first day, and a note to Nestor in Bogotá, warning him of the difficulties he would encounter and advising him again to travel as light as possible. Of the now depleted party, José and Uriel were to be our guides throughout the journey; Matias would ensure that we reached the first Indian habitation on the Piraparaná; while Bernavez went on ahead in his dugout canoe carrying two drums of our fuel. We were joined by one more man, old Miguez, who brought his own small Indian canoe. From now on we would have to make double journeys with *El Diablo* until we reached Indians who would carry our loads in their own canoes.

Next morning, while Donald and Horacio repacked much of the kit, Brian and José went ahead with a small load in *El Diablo*. The Ti narrowed and then divided; here our route towards the Piraparaná portage lay up a tiny tributary, the Caño Berada or Fish Bow Creek, as it was known to the Indians. With our arrival in the Berada, a mere stream flowing out of the undergrowth, our whole mode of travel changed. We could no longer use the motor; instead we had to push the boat upstream. We spent the rest of the day waist-deep in water, clambering over submerged timbers and occasional rocks; an Indian out in front cut a way through the fallen trees.

Christmas Day saw us cross two rock ledges where the boat had to be com-

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pletely unloaded and then dragged over. That evening was a beautiful one and we made camp at an old *mitasava*, the Indian traveller's staging point, where he erects a small palm-thatch shelter. We must have been on higher ground, for it was dry and sandy while the forest had changed to small birch-like trees, with lichen and moss underfoot. Somehow this was an appropriate place to eat our wild Christmas turkey which Miguez had shot earlier in the day and drink each other's health from the precious bottle of 'medicinal' whisky.

The next day our watery struggle continued and progress became even slower. Only half the equipment reached our camp site, this time back in low-lying forest. That evening Donald and José went ahead to the next stream junction to return at dark with the news that there was barely any water at all in the stream, and that we would be pushing the boat over dried-out sandbanks. Matias, our hardest worker, departed across country to the Piraparaná. He left at dusk, his coca pouch slung across his back to ward off the pangs of hunger. He promised to return in three days with men from the first habitation on the river; he was true to his word but it took him more than three days.

That night there was a disquieting atmosphere in the camp. Horacio was even more unhappy than usual about our excessive amount of equipment. Our three remaining Indians, José, Uriel and Miguez, kept to themselves, talking through half the night. We awoke to find Miguez vanished, never to be seen again, and José and Uriel packing their own belongings on to their backs. They said they were going to join Matias and bring back more men – we knew they were about to desert us.

We made them put down their gear and then listened to their tale of woe. We were not feeding them well enough; they wanted more than just *farinha*, they needed rice as well. They were being made to carry too much, and the stream beds were so dry that it would be impossible for us to get through until the rains arrived. So we compromised, we agreed to leave behind some of the fuel if necessary and to give them the same food as ourselves; we repeated our promise to pay all the Indians who worked for us in cloth and trade goods – or even money if it was of any use to them.

During the day we pushed the boat, first down to the previous site and then, fully loaded, back towards our present camp. Once Horacio lost his way when taking a short cut; he was not well and we thought it was due to a recurrence of malaria. That night he became worse, and with him unfit we decided to go ahead on a reconnaissance with José, leaving him to guard the equipment and recover, while we tried to reach the other side of the portage; if necessary we would go overland to find the first house.

Early next morning we packed our rucksacks and left with a week's supplies. Walking over high ground with willows, lichen and moss, to our great joy we reached the western entrance to the portage after only two hours. We walked through the low scrub for half an hour, along the path

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122 over which we would have to drag our boat. Then on the far side we saw the headwaters of the Piraparaná – there was water, not much, but at least more than in the headwaters of the Ti. We knew then we could reach the main river, even if we should find it difficult to take all the equipment. Enthusiastically we returned to tell Horacio the good news. We found him lying in his hammock and reading, and to our surprise he told us that all the trouble stemmed from a fish bone which had lodged itself in his throat.

Our best plan was to take the boat forward, leaving all the equipment ready for Matias and his Indians. We pushed with renewed efforts but over such dry sands that we often had to stop, dam the trickle behind us, then wait for the water to rise sufficiently to see us over the next sandbank. At other times we had to dig down into the sand to make a channel through which we could push *El Diablo*. Two days later we reached the portage.

Travel in Amazonia is almost entirely by water; on the smaller rivers by dug-out canoe, on the larger ones by launch or even steamer. In headwater areas it is frequently necessary to cross from one river system to another, and to do this the Indians and *caucheros* make portages or paths, along which they can carry their canoes. Portages are also used to skirt long sections of rapids where it is too dangerous to take canoes through the river. Some may be five miles long, others only a few hundred yards. The size of the boat and the number of people at hand determine the time it takes to cross. With five of us, three pulling a rope attached to *El Diablo*'s bows and two pushing from behind, it took only four hours to cover the mile over the watershed. On the flat pathway with the boat's hull sliding smoothly over rollers cut by the Indians, there was little difficulty. But when we had to heave the canoe out of the gullies it took us all the effort we could muster to bring the heavy water-logged craft – which weighed eight hundred pounds – out of the root-strewn quagmire on to the sandy track.

The choice of camp sites while travelling in such areas is a difficult one. Very often lack of time in the approaching darkness forces a rapid decision. Obviously it is best to find high ground above a rising river but this ground is often a refuge for thousands of ants and all manner of crawling insects – who naturally have the same idea in mind. It was such a camp that we hit that night and we found that all the kitbags, tins and crates were already a seething mass of black ants. Termites had completely covered a pair of boots which we had left lying on the ground, and we were besieged by sweat bees.

122. After dark there was a sudden calm. In the distance a faint hiss could be heard, gradually coming closer and closer. It was the wind racing through the forest – nearer and nearer, until it became a roar and the whole jungle was in turmoil; trees swaying, clouds of leaves flying and rotten branches crashing to the ground. In a moment torrential rain was upon us. Horacio sought safety under the plastic sheet of his mosquito net; Donald took refuge

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under his battered trilby and the groundsheets, while Brian dived beneath the tarpaulin and spent the night stretched over tins and kitbags.

The New Year came in with more rain. For all the discomfort it brought we could only look upon such deluges as a sign of good fortune; they were early this year, the rivers would now be higher and our descent easier. So we started on our journey downstream. *El Diablo*, lumbering along like a loaded ark, was stopped by every snag and log. She took days to cover the same distance as the slim canoes of the Indians, when they later travelled back up the river in a matter of hours to pick up the fuel drums we had had to leave behind on the portage.

One day canoes appeared gliding towards us, both loaded down with large wicker baskets of *farinha* and paddled by two men in loincloths. Strings of minute white beads were around their necks and black berry bracelets around each arm. An old man, his wizened face eyeing us suspiciously, was sitting in the bows of the first canoe.

This was our first real contact with the Indians of the Piraparaná. Their immediate reaction was not one of fear, but rather, like our own, of enquiry and interest. They said nothing until José hailed them in their own dialect. There ensued a long, almost formal exchange of greetings which we were to hear many times when travelling through their territory. Before they left we asked them to carry a message for Nestor – in case they should meet him, for they were travelling to the Río Ti.

Much depended on our guide José. That he had been with Padre Elorza was not necessarily to our advantage, for in the first place we could not be sure what effect the first contact with Catholicism had had on the Indians of the Piraparaná, nor did we know what instructions José had been given by the padres. We had to depend on him entirely both for our own safety when travelling downstream and for the information we were to get. He was not a very pleasant or easy character. From the outset he had always wanted to have his own way and if this was not granted then he became moody and unco-operative. We could never be certain what he would do next and after his attempt at desertion we could not trust him. However he worked very hard and showed remarkable common sense, and without him we would never have got through the rapids ahead of us.

His experience with white men had not only come from the Mission. Some five years previously a *cauchero* had come to his river home close to the Brazilian frontier. He had taken six boys away with him to work the wild rubber trees and one of them was José. Later he had escaped from the *cauchero*, but during those four years he had learnt how to operate an outboard motor, to handle money and had even been in an aeroplane. He had come under the Mission's wing only recently, and it may have been this combination of experiences that had complicated his character. He no longer possessed the Indian's direct simplicity.

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Tukano

122 The last days before reaching the first Tukano house on the Piraparaná were not easy ones. At one point we had to cross two formidable waterfalls where all the equipment and fuel was carried overland, while we dragged the boat over the riverside rocks to avoid the midstream torrent. At the first of these the boat was lowered over a twenty-foot rock wall by means of a crevice into which we had forced timbers. *El Diablo* began to show severe signs of weakness. The ribbing above the hollowed log hull began to give and the planking above it worked loose at the joints. Large lumps of pitch came astray and we found ourselves caulking her sides with strips torn from our trousers. On many occasions we hit submerged rocks and logs, and the further we went the more we had to bale. Once a jagged rock edge pierced a large hole in the bows and water came gushing in. One thing was certain: an aluminium boat would by this time have been ripped to pieces.

Our journey downstream was a cold, wet and dreary affair. Both Donald and Horacio had ceased to wear boots because of raw blisters. Our shins had become a mass of open sores from knocks sustained underwater. But these exposed rocks gave Brian opportunities for geology. Much to everyone's dismay – except his – *El Diablo* became more and more weighed down by samples which found their way into the used biscuit tins. José always wanted to know whether there was gold, but there never was, nor indeed were there any fossils. We were attempting to make a compass traverse of our route, but our methods at this stage were hardly accurate.

We made camp one night on the driest land available, near a junction with another tributary. It was an unhealthy spot with bats swooping low beneath the trees. Later one of our guides had his toe incised by a vampire bat and woke in the morning to find his hammock soaked in blood; these bats often carried rabies. While Horacio was making breakfast, a scorpion ran up his arm. When he yelled, José, who was standing close by, flicked it dexterously into the hot ashes of the fire.

Some days later, after an unusually long stretch of paddling, we jumped
136 into the water to pull *El Diablo* over a fallen tree. A large boa constrictor unfurled itself from beneath the boat, shot between our legs and zigzagged swiftly through the water in front, its dark green body coiling and recoiling as it vanished down the river.

It is a mistake to think that the forest is alive with poisonous reptiles and fierce animals. The discomforts stem from ants, insects and many varieties of stinging flies. We rarely saw wild animals although birds were quite plentiful. In this higher part of the river, a particular small bird would always warn all other creatures of our approach with a piercing three-note whistle. Calling louder and louder it was answered by others in the vicinity. The noise was rending and the more we talked, the more it sang. The Indians called it the *Wa-pey-yer*, and we later heard this bird had driven some explorers mad.

122 For the first time in a week the sun pierced the thick canopy of leaves,

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catching the shining emerald, blue and yellow wings of giant butterflies. 122
José, who had been carefully watching the passing bank, asked to borrow one of our shotguns. He soon returned with three *pava* – a type of large blackcock – which he had shot with four cartridges. Like all Indians, he was much more adept at hunting than ourselves.

The day wore on and the river widened, trees and creepers came right down to the water's edge, their leaves reflected peacefully by the calm surface. Sometimes the thick green foliage was covered in pale purple flowers, rather like lilac, whose sweet smell floated across the water as the boat moved through the beams of sunlight. It was warm and the scene had changed. We were no longer enclosed and we only once had to jump into the water to guide the loaded boat through a rapid.

Here Horacio, whose ankles had swollen to an alarming size, stumbled and fell in the rushing torrent. Perhaps this was an indication of our condition and the need to reach dry land. Sores had not healed and many had started to go septic. By contrast José and Uriel had gone from strength to strength, their bodies seeming to profit from the very hard work they had had to undergo.

Now the trees' shadows were lengthening across [illegible] and three white egrets glided ahead of us. José's voice broke the silence. 'Only one more turn and we reach Kuarumey's *maloca*. His father was a famous chief who refused to allow any white man to enter the river – now he is dead.' As he said this we rounded the last bend.

There in front of us rising from the water's edge was a clearing of green 123
manioc with an expanse of sky behind. We paddled the boat alongside the wooden canoes moored to the bank, while in the dusk we could barely distinguish the features of the Indians as they came down the path towards us. They carried no arms and seemed to be friendly. Soon they were helping us unload *El Diablo*. We debated whether we would stay the night by the river or in the *maloca*. The Indians however were in no two minds about this, and we found ourselves stumbling up the path in the darkness, following our laden hosts, very glad to feel the good dry earth beneath our bare feet and the warmth of the fires inside the great *maloca*.